

A Different Path: Colored Stones

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Summary: Once upon a time, a mage rose from the Sacred Ashes and saved the world. But with a small twist in time, things could have gone another way entirely... She's a thug. A casteless criminal. A nothing and a nobody. And now she may be their only hope. A young dwarven woman must rise, or the world will fall.

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Her face throbbed from where her cousin had backhanded her. Bridget looked in the mirror to see just how much damage he'd done. There was a glimpse of movement behind her and she whirled. Then she relaxed. "It looks worse than it feels."

Matril shook his head, and went to the pack he'd left in one corner of the room. He rummaged for a moment before pulling out a small vial and a small parcel. "Here."

"Mat..." She shook her head.

"There are mages all over the place." He smiled at her. "It isn't like stealing more will be all that difficult."

"Good point." She accepted the restorative, and drank it down before sitting on the side of the bed. The poultice was cool on the bruises as Matril gently spread it over her cheekbone.

"No cuts. You won't need stitches." Matril's voice was quiet. "He have an excuse this time, or..."

"That third relic was a forgery." Bridget glanced up at him.

"Shit."

"He knows it wasn't you. Hell, the forgery is old enough that it's worth something. Just not as much as the real thing." Bridget shook her head. "Might be in your best interest to stay out of his line of sight for a while though."

"Well, that's always true." He finished tending her, and started putting the pack away. "He's got no right to do this to you, Bridget."

"Rights are one of the many things Tan doesn't give a shit about." Bridget shrugged. "I'm his cousin. He won't..." She caught Matril's arm, and lifted his sleeve. Bruises in the shape of a handprint stood out starkly on pale skin of his forearm. She sighed. "Shit."

He actually smiled at her, which made her feel even worse. "At least I don't have to spend the next few days looking like a raccoon." He put an arm around her, and she leaned into him. "This Conclave shit will be done soon enough, and we'll be able to put a few miles between us and Tan again."

"There's a lot of merc bands hiring." She kept her voice quiet. "You should consider..."

"If running were an option, I'd have been gone a while ago." He smiled. "Slip you into my pocket and light out for Rivain."

"You know..." She swallowed, and looked up at him. "This goes wrong, you know he's going to kill you?" She sighed. "And he's talking about setting up in Kal'Hirol after, so he might..."

"I know." He took a deep breath. "I've got a couple stashes. Up by those mines, marked the usual way. If..." He sighed. "Well, if he does kill me, they're yours. Get clear. If he doesn't..." He pressed his forehead against hers affectionately. "One's yours. Get clear, and meet me at..." He considered a moment, and then his grin was positively evil. "The Pearl."

"In your dreams, Rat."

#

A smile came to her face as she watched the slender elven woman break the thumb of the unfortunate idiot that had tried to grab her ass. Second one tonight. She walked over. "You know, you'd think they'd learn."

The elven woman chuckled. "At least that one bought me a drink first." She looked down at Bridget. "How many have tried to pull you into their laps?"

"Just the one earlier." Bridget shrugged. "Breaking their thumbs is good, but I prefer to go after the part of the anatomy that actually causes the problem."

The elven woman nodded, and then glanced over her shoulder at the man sidling up to her. "She's got a point. Don't make me prove it." The man swallowed, and backed away, making a comment about feral knife-ears as he did so. The woman tossed the rest of the drink back, then glanced down at Bridget again. "Sulana."

"Bridget." She shrugged. "Fancy a game of Diamondback?"

"Never played before." She smiled. "Wouldn't mind learning."

#

Bridget headed back up towards the temple. Too many humans. She had no idea how she was going to find Matril before Tan did, but she had to try. Hopefully, Matril would realize something had gone wrong and light out, but... Stone, he was the closest thing she had to a real friend. And Tan wasn't kidding about skinning him. He wouldn't be the first. The last one had taken four days to die.

She sighed. There was no sign of him. She caught a glimpse of the elven woman. "Sulana."

"Yes."

"Yes." Bridget started to nod, and then looked up at the woman. "Yes to the offer?" She hadn't been completely serious, but with a blade like this woman, maybe...

"I can't make it official until the Conclave is done. I'm responsible for a couple people until then, but after -" Sulana blinked and turned. "Did you hear something?"

"Someone shouting." Matril? With Sulana's blade, maybe she could get her friend out of trouble and safely away.

"Not sure." Sulana shook her head. "Stupid place has too many echos."

Bridget pointed before she started moving. "I'll go this way, you go that."

#

She wasn't sure what hurt more, her head or her hand. She vaguely recalled running into Sulana while looking for Matril. And now she was manacled, sitting in a jail cell, surrounded by men pointing swords at her. It wasn't the first time she'd woken in a jail cell after spending an evening with Matril, but the glowing hand thing was kind of a new one. It sparked, and Bridget gasped as pain shot up her arm.

Two women entered. And almost immediately starting going into a good guard bad guard routine. Though she'd give the woman in the eyeball armor credit. She made a very good bad guard. Her jaw almost unhinged when she ran the woman's words through her head again. "What do you mean everyone's dead?"

"Explain this." The woman held up the glowing hand.

Bridget shook her head. "Wish I could, but..." She swallowed. If everyone was dead, then... What the hell was going on?

The bad guard lunged at her, only to be pulled back by the good guard. Cassandra and Leliana, respectfully. Or so it appeared. They spoke, and next thing she knew Cassandra was pulling her out of the

building and pointing up at the...

Stone.

There was a...

Oh Stone.

#

"We call it 'The Breach'. It's a massive rift into the world of demons that grows larger with each passing hour." Cassandra turned back to find the dwarven woman staring open mouthed up at the sky. "It's not the only such rift. Just the largest. All were caused by the explosion at the Conclave?"

"An explosion can do that?" The dwarven woman shook her head.

"This one did." She took a long look at the prisoner. Her coloration would have marked her as Rivaini, had she been human. She wore a couple scars, a small one above her eye and a slightly larger one across her mouth. When they'd found her, there had been a second, half-healed scar across her mouth, but it had vanished with the healing she'd received. No stranger to a fight, as the battered armor she wore would also indicate. "Unless we act, the Breach may grow until it swallows the world."

The Breach sparked, as did the mark on the prisoner's hand. The dwarven woman fell to her knees, crying out in pain.

Cassandra knelt next to her. "Each time the Breach expands, your mark spreads..." She gestured. There was no time to coddle. "And it is killing you. It may be the key to stopping this, but there isn't much time."

The dwarven woman took a deep breath, and looked once more at the sky. "Alright." She started to get back to her feet.

For a moment, she scarcely dared to hope. "Then...?"

"If I can help, then..." The prisoner nodded. "I'll do what I can. Whatever I can."

#

Bridget followed Cassandra out of the makeshift city. She was conscious of people staring at her. Most of the looks were hostile, but...

As soon as they were out of the city, Cassandra freed her of the bindings. They were on their way to test the mark on something small. Hopefully, by then they'd have a plan to get her up to the Breach. The pulsing pain came again. Cassandra helped her get back on her feet. They were halfway across the bridge when something fell from the sky, destroying it beneath their feet.

She winced, rubbing her head. A demon rose from the ground. "Stay behind me." Cassandra shouted, and readied her shield, moving to face it. A second demon began to form behind the woman. Bridget looked around, and saw some weaponry. She grabbed a shield of her own,

getting it into position just in time to block the demon's claws. Her hand found a sword hilt, and she moved to attack.

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She told herself confronting an already angry Seeker was not a good idea. But going into a demon-infested valley unarmed seemed like a much, much worse one. Fortunately, the Seeker saw the sense of that. They hadn't gone much further when she heard the sounds of fighting. Ahead, soldiers, assisted by a dwarf with a crossbow and an elf with magic, were engaged in battle against the demons.

Bridget exchanged a look with Cassandra, and they both charged in to help. The demons fell quickly, and the next thing she knew she was being dragged to the rift by the elf. And then...

"What did you do?" She stared down at her hand.

"I did nothing." He nodded to her. "The credit is yours."

"But I'm a dwarf." She shook her head. He tried to explain, but nothing about it made any sense to her. How could she have a magic mark on her hand? Something they were saying reached her ears.

"Varric Tethras?" She stared. "The Varric Tethras?"

He grinned at her. "The one and only."

"I liked your..." She cut off. "Probably not the best time to discuss literature." She looked up at the elf. "Who are you?"

"My name is Solas, if there are to be introductions. I'm pleased to see you still live."

Varric shrugged. "He means, 'I kept that mark from killing you while you slept.'"

"Well..." Bridget offered the mage her unmarked hand. "Thanks." He accepted the handshake. "I'm guessing this wasn't all there was to it or..." She looked back at Cassandra.

Cassandra nodded. "We must get to the forward camp, quickly."

#

Bridget fought the urge to hide behind Cassandra when she heard the Chantry fellow start talking about executions. Usually she had Matril to do the talking but... Stone, where was he? Hopefully, he'd decided to lay low in the chaos. Or maybe light out. She'd have to check the caches to know for sure. To her surprise, they turned towards her.

"How do you think we should proceed?" Cassandra raised an eyebrow.

Mountains or soldiers. She swallowed. "With the soldiers." She looked down at her hand. "Not sure how much longer we have before..." She nodded. "Faster would be better."

"Leliana, bring everyone in the valley." Cassandra gestured. "Everyone."

#

Cassandra glanced at the prisoner. When there was fighting, she was right there at the front, sword and shield proving that she was a dangerous force on the battlefield. And as soon as the fighting was done, she became hesitant and uncertain once more. She was currently staring up at Cullen as though expecting him to turn into a monster or something. "Do not congratulate me, Commander." Cassandra gestured at the dwarven woman. "This is the prisoner's doing."

"Is it?" Cullen looked down at her. "I hope they are right about you."

"I'm going to try." The dwarven woman nodded.

"That's all we can ask." Cullen smiled before turning back to Cassandra. "The way to the temple should be clear. Leliana will try to meet you there."

"Then we'd best move quickly." She rolled a shoulder and looked over the field. Fewer dead than she'd been expecting. Brehan had been right when he'd suggested recruiting the man. "Give us time, Commander."

"Maker watch over you."

#

"Stone..." Bridget stared at the wreckage. "That's..."

"The Temple of Sacred Ashes." Cassandra shook her head.

No one could have survived whatever had done this. Bridget felt tears pricking at her eyes. "So many..." She swallowed. "Alright." She looked down at her hand. "Alright, let's go."

#

Voices coming out of the sky. She shivered. Then she shivered again when Varric pointed out the red lyrium. Not good, and Solas's explanation didn't make it any better. The voices came again, and her eyes widened as she recognized the voice of the woman. Matriel had gone to the prayers a few times, and she'd accompanied him. That was...

"That is Divine Justinia's voice." Cassandra was looking around her as if trying to pinpoint it.

As they went down towards the rift, the Divine's voice came again. And then she heard her own voice answer. Cassandra turned towards her, forming a question.

Images appeared in the sky. Some kind of ritual? And she'd interrupted it. She heard Cassandra demanding answers, but all she could do was shake her head. "I don't remember."

"Echoes of what happened here. The Fade bleeds into this place." Solas gestured at the strange glowing wound in the air. "This rift is not sealed, but it is closed... albeit temporarily. I believe that with the mark, the rift can be opened, and then sealed properly and

safely. However, opening the rift will likely attract attention from the other side."

"That means demons." Cassandra began giving orders.

"Demons." Bridget sighed. "More demons. Why can't anything nice ever fall out of the sky? Like cake."

#

She felt like she'd fallen down a mountain and hit every rock on the way by the time the demon fell. Some of the soldiers were dead, and the rest looked about how she felt. Solas directed her to the rift, and she raised her hand to it. Her vision was going black by the time it vanished. Her last thought was a hope Matril wasn't waiting at the Pearl for her.

End
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